



ASSIGNMENT 3

DIGGING UP AND ANALYZING THE PAST

Assignment 3 is the last devoted to the method and theory of archaeology. We discuss the basic principles of archaeological excavations, of uncovering and recording archaeological data in the ground. Back in the laboratory, we learn how to analyze artifacts, then discuss some of the fundamental theories of world prehistory. By the end of this assignment, we are confident that you will have sufficient archaeological grounding to embark on a journey through the intricacies of human prehistory.



WHAT LIES AHEAD

Assignment Objectives

After completing Assignment 3 you will be able to:

1. Describe and evaluate the uses and limitations of the main forms of archaeological excavation, and be able to evaluate them against the problems of excavating different types of archaeological sites.
2. Describe the main methods of artifact analysis, their uses and limitations.
3. Describe and evaluate the ways in which archaeologists study ancient human remains and diet, and discuss their uses and limitations.
4. Discuss the uses and limitations of culture history and describe major mechanisms of culture change.
5. Discuss the major theories of world prehistory described in this assignment.



WORK REQUIRED

Assignment 3 requires you to:

1. Readings: Archaeology, A Brief Introduction. Read Chapters 7-8, 11, 13, plus Anthology.



Note: the midterm Short Paper prompt will be posted on Friday.



LECTURE 1: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

This lecture explores archaeological excavation, for this is the most fundamental of all archaeological methods. The lecture discusses:

- The basic principles of archaeological excavation, the uses and limitations of different approaches.
- The excavation of various sites, large and small, excavation strategies, and the problems which the excavators confronted.



LECTURE 2: ARTIFACTS ANALYSIS

At intervals in this course, you encounter artifacts of various forms and differing complexity. How does an archaeologist analyze and classify artifacts? This lecture examines some of the basic problems of classification and typology, as well as touching on the issue of ethnographic analogy. We finish up this part of the course with an examination of an innovative project at Little Big Horn, "Custer's Last Stand," that is literally re-writing history through clever research design and cutting-edge artifact analysis.



FILM OR GUEST LECTURE TBA

Look to GauchoSpace for information.



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

For all its seeming romance, archaeological excavation is a highly precise science. It is said that a successful excavation should be such a complete record that the excavator can reconstruct the site down to the inch using the excavation notebooks. Of course, this is an exaggeration, but archaeologists never forget that all excavation is destruction of the finite records of the past.



Our readings on excavation are in two parts:

Archaeology: A Brief Introduction. Read Chapter 7.

This reading describes the basics of excavation and some of the many sites archaeologists investigate.

Amplify this reading with Sir Mortimer Wheeler's classic essay on a Roman attack of A.D. 43, which shows how archaeological evidence can be used to paint a portrait



of the past.

Anthology Section: "The Siege of Maiden Castle."



ANALYSIS OF ARTIFACTS AND FOOD REMAINS

Given that this course is mainly concerned with major developments in human prehistory, there is little point in delving deeply into artifact analysis and the study of food remains, except for a general understanding on your part of the basic terms, methods, and principles involved.

The basics are summarized conveniently for you in:



Archaeology: A Brief Introduction. Read Chapters 8 and 11 in their entirety.

When you have finished, read on:



INTERPRETING THE PAST: CULTURE CHANGE

We end our discussion of method and theory with a survey of the ways in which archaeologists interpret human prehistory. This requires more reading, so settle in for a fairly long reading session on interpreting culture history.



First, the mechanisms of culture change . . .

Archaeology: A Brief Introduction. Read Chapter 13.



AN OUTLINE OF WORLD PREHISTORY

Starting with Assignment 4, we begin our journey through human prehistory, from our origins over 2.5 million years ago.



Review pp. 44-49 in Archaeology: A Brief Introduction. This provides you with a background overview of what lies ahead.



A gentle reminder that you should get to work on your Mid-Term Short Paper (prompt posted Friday of this week), due at the end of next week (Assignment 4). See the course Syllabus and GauchoSpace for details.

E N D O F A S S I G N M E N T 3

ASSIGNMENT 3: ANTHOLOGY

1. MORTIMER WHEELER: THE SIEGE OF MAIDEN CASTLE, ENGLAND.

Sir Mortimer Wheeler was one of the great excavators of the twentieth century. Colorful, military-like in his organization and attitude to excavation, he refined Pitt-Rivers' methods to a high pitch in the 1920s and 1930s. He excavated mostly Roman sites, with the dig at the great Iron Age hillfort at Maiden Castle in southern England being the climax of his British work. Maiden Castle was attacked and invested by a Roman legion in A.D. 43. Here is Wheeler's brilliant reconstruction of this long-forgotten event.

THE EARLY ROMAN PERIOD (C. A.D. 43-70)

And so we reach the Roman invasion of A. D. 43. That part of the army of conquest wherewith we are concerned in Dorset had as its nucleus the Second Augustan Legion, whose commander, at any rate in the earlier campaigns, was the future Emperor Vespasian. Precisely how soon the invaders reached Maiden Castle can only be guessed, but by A. D. 47 the Roman arms had reached the Severn, and Dorset must already have been overrun. Suetonius affirms that Vespasian reduced "two very formidable tribes and over twenty towns (oppida), together with the Isle of Wight," and it cannot be doubted that, whether or no the Durotriges (as is likely enough) were one of the tribes in question, the conquest of the Wessex hill-fort system is implied in the general statement. Nor is it improbable that, with the hints provided by the mention of the Isle of Wight and by the archaeological evidence for the subsequent presence of the Second Legion near Seaton in eastern Devon, a main line of advance lay through Dorset roughly along the route subsequently followed by the Roman road to Exeter. From that road today the traveller regards the terraced ramparts of the western entrance of Maiden Castle; and it requires no great effort of the imagination to conjure up the ghost of Vespasian himself, here confronted with the greatest of his "twenty towns." Indeed, something less than imagination is now required to reconstruct the main sequence of events at the storming of Maiden Castle, for the excavation of the eastern entrance has yielded tangible evidence of it. With only a little amplification it may be reconstructed as follows.

Approaching from the direction of the Isle of Wight, Vespasian's legion may be supposed to have crossed the River Frome at the only easy crossing hereabouts—where Roman and modern Dorchester were subsequently to come into being. Before the advancing troops, some 2 miles away, the sevenfold ramparts of the western gates of Dunium towered above the cornfields which probably swept, like their modern successors, up to the

fringe of the defenses. Whether any sort of assault was attempted upon these gates we do not at present know; their excessive strength makes it more likely that, leaving a guard upon them, Vespasian moved his main attack to the somewhat less formidable eastern end. What happened there is plain to read. First, the regiment of artillery, which normally accompanied a legion on campaign, was ordered into action, and put down a barrage of iron-shod ballista-arrows over the eastern part of the site. Following this barrage, the infantry advanced up the slope, cutting its way from rampart to rampart, tower to tower. In the innermost bay of the entrance, close outside the actual gates, a number of huts had recently been built; these were now set alight, and under the rising clouds of smoke the gates were stormed and the position carried. But resistance had been obstinate and the fury of the attackers was roused. For a space, confusion and massacre dominated the scene. Men and women, young and old, were savagely cut down, before the legionaries were called to heel and the work of systematic destruction began. That work included the uprooting of some at least of the timbers which revetted the fighting-platform on the summit of the main rampart; but above all it consisted of the demolition of the gates and the overthrow of the high stone walls which flanked the two portals. The walls were now reduced to the lowly and ruinous state in which they were discovered by the excavator nearly nineteen centuries later.

That night, when the fires of the legion shone out (we may imagine) in orderly lines across the valley, the survivors crept forth from their broken stronghold and, in the darkness, buried their dead as nearly as might be outside their tumbled gates, in that place where the ashes of their burned huts lay warm and thick upon the ground. The task was carried out anxiously and hastily and without order, but, even so, from few graves were omitted those tributes of food and drink which were the proper and traditional perquisites of the dead. At daylight on the morrow, the legion moved westward to fresh conquest, doubtless taking with it the usual levy of hostages from the vanquished.

Thereafter, salving what they could of their crops and herds, the disarmed townsfolk made shift to put their house in order. Forbidden to refortify their gates, they built new roadways across the sprawling ruins, between gateless ramparts that were already fast assuming the blunted profiles that are theirs today. And so, for some two decades, a demilitarized Maiden Castle retained its inhabitants, or at least a nucleus of them. Just so long did it take the Roman authorities to adjust the old order to the new, to prepare new towns for old. And then finally, on some day towards the close of the sixties of the century, the town was ceremonially abandoned, its remaining walls were formally "sighted," and Maiden Castle lapsed into the landscape among the farm-lands of Roman Dorchester.

So much for the story; now for its basis. First, scattered over the eastern end of Maiden Castle, mostly in and about the eastern entrance and always at the same Romano-Belgic level, were found upwards of a dozen iron arrowheads of two types: a type with a pyramidal point, and the simple flat-bladed type with turn-over socket. Arrowheads occurred at no other Iron Age level, but both types are common on Roman military sites where ballistae but not hand-bows are to be inferred. There, then, in the relatively small area uncovered, are the vestiges of the bombardment.

Secondly, the half-moon bay which represents the Iron Age B adaptation of the Iron Age A barbican, close outside the portals of the eastern entrance, was covered with a thick layer of ash associated with the postholes of three or more circular or roundish huts. In and immediately below this ash were quantities of late Belgic or "Belgicizing" pottery. In the surface of the ash was similar pottery with scraps of pre-Flavian Samian. There are the burned Belgic huts, covered by the trodden vestiges of the continued post-conquest occupation for which more tangible evidence will be offered shortly.

Thirdly, into this ash a series of graves had been roughly cut, with no regularity either of outline or of orientation, and into them had been thrown, in all manner of attitudes — crouched, extended, on the back, on the side, on the face, even sitting up — thirty-eight skeletons of men and women, young and old; sometimes two persons were huddled together in the same grave. In ten cases extensive cuts were present on the skull, some on the top, some on the front, some on the back. In another case, one of the arrowheads already described was found actually embedded in the vertebra, having entered the body from the front below the heart. The victim had been finished off with a cut on the head. Yet another skull had been pierced by an implement of square section, probably a ballista bolt. The last two and some of the sword-cuts were doubtless battle wounds; but one skull, which had received no less than nine savage cuts, suggests the fury of massacre rather than the tumult of battle — a man does not stay to kill his enemy eight or nine times in the melee; and the neck of another skeleton had been dislocated, probably by hanging. Nevertheless, the dead had been buried by their friends, for most of them were accompanied by bowls or, in one case, a mug for the traditional food and drink. More notable, in two cases the dead held joints of lamb in their hands — joints chosen carefully as young and succulent. Many of the dead still wore their gear: armlets of iron or shale, an iron finger-ring, and in three cases bronze toe-rings, representing a custom not previously, it seems, observed in prehistoric Britain but reminiscent of the Moslem habit of wearing toe-rings as ornaments or as preventives or cures of disease. One man lay in a double grave with an iron battle-axe, a knife and, strangely, a

bronze ear-pick across his chest. The whole war cemetery as it lay exposed before us was eloquent of mingled piety and distraction; of weariness, of dread, of darkness, but yet not of complete forgetfulness.

The date of the cemetery was indicated by a variety of evidence. Most obvious is the Roman arrowhead embedded in the vertebra, but other associated relics point to the same conclusion. The seventeen pots put into the graves at the time of burial are all of that Wessex "Romano-Belgic overlap" class which has long been recognized at Jordan Hill, Weymouth, and elsewhere. The gear with one of the skeletons included, as has been remarked above, a Roman ear-scoop," the use of which may or may not have been understood more clearly by its Belgic possessor than by the modern antiquary; at least it implies Roman contacts which, in Wessex, appear not long to have anticipated the Roman Conquest. One grave, moreover, contained a late British coin, and though it was impossible to say safely whether the coin was inserted at the interment or was incorporated in the loose ash into which the grave was cut, at least it was dropped within a very short time of the event. And finally, the materials included in the strata which "bracket" the cemetery are themselves, as noted above, sufficient to indicate a date at the end of the pre-Conquest period.

There, then, is the climax of the more human side of the story of conquest. But on the structural side the evidence for that event and for its sequel is no less vivid. On the topmost Belgic road-metal, in both portals of the eastern entrance but particularly in the southern, excavation revealed the tumbled stones from the massive walls that had formerly flanked the entrances. Here and there the fallen stones lay overlapping, like a collapsed pack of cards, in the sequence in which they had formerly stood as a vertical wall. With them was no cascade of rampart-earth such as might have implied a fall through subsidence, even could one presuppose the coincidence of the simultaneous fall of every part of the structure; the walls had been deliberately pulled down and no attempt had been made to replace them. But that was not all. Over the debris in each portal a new road had been built, metalled like the Belgic roads now buried beneath them. The new roads partially covered the surviving bases of the flanking walls, showing that the condition of these today is identical with their condition at the time of the road-building and confirming the permanence of the structural ruin. No provision of any kind was made in the new scheme for a gate; not a single post-hole was associated with the new road, and indeed the mutilated rampart-ends would have provided a poor setting for a fixed barrier. The implications of all this are evident. The entrance had been systematically "slighted" and its military value reduced permanently to a minimum; but traffic through it did not cease, no interval occurred in the continuity of the occupation.

The picture is now complete in outline. Disarmed at the Roman Conquest, Maiden Castle remained in use for about a quarter of a century after the invasion, a pre-Roman city still in all essentials, partaking only a little of the cultural equipment of its conquerors. The picture is a reasonable and convincing one. The first generation of Roman rule was preoccupied with the subjugation of the difficult hill-countries of the north and west, with the development of mining areas, the planning of arterial roads, the founding or development of those few towns which had an immediate military or commercial function. Dorset offered, it is true, iron ore on a modest scale; but between Sussex and the Mendips there was little mineral wealth to attract the Roman prospector in the first flush of conquest. Wessex could wait. There was no urgent need to upset the traditional economic basis of the urbanized peasantry which crowded the downlands. To do so would have been to court added political difficulties at a time when difficulties were already manifold. It was better that, under surveillance, the Wessex farmers should for a time (and doubtless in return for the periodical payment of just or unjust dues) be allowed to maintain themselves in the fashion which they knew. The removal or, alternatively, the ennoblement of their rulers would rob them of independent leadership. A few police-patrols would do the rest.

(Extract from Mortimer Wheeler, Maiden Castle, Society of Antiquaries of London, 1943. Reprinted with permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London).